

Using Irish Land Records in Your Family History Research

Class 3: Irish Estate Records

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Irish landed estates began in the 17th century with the Plantation of Ulster. The practice was continued through the Cromwellian Restoration and the Williamite Land Settlements. This system of land ownership allowed for single individuals to hold title to lands ranging from 1,000 acres to 100,000 acres and then lease parcels to farmers and other tenants. The system was in effect until Acts of Parliament began to break up these estates in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Landed Estates

Owners of the larger estates (upwards of 100,000 acres) were usually members of the aristocracy and they may have had several estates in Ireland and Britain. Records of these larger estates tend to survive in some fashion.

The smaller estates of 1,000 to 3,000 acres were often owned by more modest farmers and the records may not survive or may have only certain records that have been preserved.

Note: Almost all landowners were members of the Church of Ireland.

Understanding the Landed Estate System

The system is comprised of two main parties: Landowners and Tenants

Landowners:

- Entered into leases with individuals/tenants
- May have used agents/middlemen (aka jobbers) to handle the leases and day to day issues

Lessee/Tenant:

- Entered into leases with landowner
- Had to pay set rents 2 times a year – usually May 1 and November 1
- May have had a specific number of years on the lease (three-lives, 21 years, 31 years, etc.)
- May have then rented some of their parcel of land to sub-tenants or cottiers

What are Estate Records?

Estate records are the variety of ledgers, letters, maps, and more that were routinely generated in the running of a large landed estate, especially if the landowner was a member of the aristocracy. Because these records have survived for many estates, they are often the only source available for identifying those Irish ancestors of the 18th and 19th centuries. They may be the only record set available for searching for your poor ancestors. Because of the yearly rents, these records may show a year-to-year location for your ancestor.

However, these records do not exist for all of Ireland, and some of the smaller landowners' records may have been destroyed. Other records may still be in private hands. They are also seldom indexed requiring the researcher to be tenacious when working with them.

Types of Records:

- Leases and lease books
- Rentals, rent books, and tenant lists
- Maps
- Correspondence
- Emigration lists and eviction records
- Account books
- Manor Court Records

Anatomy of a Lease

The leases are one of the most important records generated, as they may list family relationships that you may be unable to find anywhere else. The primary items you want to identify and analyze include:

- Name of the lessor (the landowner or the middleman)
- Name of the lessee (the tenant)
- Location of the farm
- Rent to be paid
- Tenure of the lease (length of the lease)
- Conditions required of the lessee (may be limitations on what can be done on the property or sometimes required improvements)

Rental Books

The rental books usually list the townland of the property, then the name of the tenant and the rents that have been paid and if there are any arrears. Sometimes you will also see where a new tenant has taken over or perhaps a list of cottiers also living on the property. These volumes are often the next most valuable when researching your ancestors before census records in Ireland, especially if the church records don't date back far enough.

Correspondence

Usually the correspondence records are between the landlord and any agents he may have. Sometimes the correspondence has more to do with the demesne. You may discover information about what the day-to-day life was like for the tenants and there may also be named tenants who were working on the estate in some way.

Emigration and Eviction Records

There may not be actual ledgers identified as such. Instead you may find that your first clues to either a family emigrating to America or being evicted is found in the newspapers. However, once you have found such information in the newspapers, you may then be able to turn to the rent books or other account ledgers for a specific manor or landowner to see if you can determine what happened.

Account Books

For many landed estates, the account books have more to do with the accounts of the landowner's personal abode (upkeep, purchases, etc.) than the estate at large. However, these should not be dismissed when working in a particular set of records as the Landowner may have hired tenants to do work on the home, stable, or may include the paying of monies to some of those who had skills but perhaps lacked the necessary goods to work at their profession.

Manor Court Records

Most manors conducted their own courts, especially in the 17th century. Serving on a jury of Court Leet was sometimes one of the conditions included in a lease. As the things began to change with the introduction of a criminal justice system and magistrates, many of the manor courts were relegated to civil proceedings often involving lack of payment for services or goods or fines for disobeying the rules of the manor. However, if they survive for the manor in question, they may provide insight into how your ancestor got along with his neighbors.

Landed Estates Court Rentals

The Great Famine did more than affect the health of the Irish. For those who owned the large estates, the Famine affected the economic viability and management of these lands. With the establishment of the Encumbered Estates Court in 1849, landowners could apply to have their estates sold in an effort to get out of bankruptcy. The "sales catalogues" created to sell these lands include valuable information for those researching their ancestors. A catalogue includes the following:

- Title Page
- Brief descriptive particulars of the estate
- Tenures of the lots
- Conditions of sale
- Maps
- List of rentals

And each page of rentals includes:

- Denomination (townland or location of the land)
- Tenant's name
- Gale days
- Yearly rents
- Quantity of land
- Tenure of the tenant (could be fee farm, lease in years, lease in lives)
- Additional observations (may name roads nearby, etc.)

These records are in a variety of places including the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), National Library and National Archives (Dublin), and on FindMyPast.com.

Identifying Estates

There are several local and county histories that may assist in identifying the estates that existed. Also, several Irish genealogy guides listed in the bibliography are extremely useful in determining if a particular townland may appear in landed estate records. Griffith's Valuation, though enumerated between 1847 and 1864, may at least identify a current lessor such that you may be able to track that person back, especially if he is a member of the aristocracy. You may also find information about various estates from NUI Galway and the 1876 Landholders List—both of which are online and found in the list of online resources at the end of this handout.

Finding Records

Once you have identified the likely landowner, the next step is to determine if the records have survived and if so, where you may locate them. Again, some of the published guides mentioned in the bibliography have extensive lists of estates and where those records can be found. Two major repositories to begin your research would be the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) in Belfast and the National Library of Ireland (NLI) in Dublin. The Family Search Library in Salt Lake City may also have microfilmed some of the major collections and through their FamilySearch.org website you may discover that some of the records are digitized.

Tip: Look for types of records or parish names in addition to names of owners. Few collections are catalogued as "Landed Estate Records."

Definitions

Conditions – those items state in the lease that the tenant was either required to do or forbidden from doing.

Cottier – an undertenant who worked for a farmer (tenant) for his accommodations and a plot of land to cultivate.

Court Leet – originally a meeting of the freeholders of the manor who could adjudicate criminal issues, though later it became an administrative body.

Demesne – land attached to a manor and retained for the owner’s own use.

Demised Premises – the legal term for the land being leased.

Fee farm grant – a lease in perpetuity.

Gale Days – the dates on which rent or interest was due to be paid.

Lease for Lives – a lease that did not expire until the individuals named in the lease died; could have been from one life to five lives, those three were most common; also may have had a lease in years and the statement “which ever was longest;” the lives are often the children and may be identified as such with ages.

Lessee – the grantee, usually the tenant.

Lessor – the grantor, usually the landowner (but could be an agent).

Manor Court – held by the landlord as part of his royal patent to handle affairs of his estate including civil actions such as debts, fines, trespassing, and damages.

Middleman or Jobber – the agent who may have been the go between of the landowner and the tenant.

Tenant – the person renting the parcel of land and living on it.

Tenure – the length of the lease (may be given in years (21, 31, 41) or in lives).

Suggested Bibliography

De Moleyns, Thomas, *The Landowners and Agents Practical Guide*, 6th ed., (Dublin: E. Ponsonby, 1872).

Dooley, Terence, *The Big Houses and Landed Estates of Ireland*, (Dublin: Four Court Press, 2007).

Grenham, John, *Tracing Your Irish Ancestors*, 4th ed., (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2012).

Nugent, Brian, *A Guide to the 18th Century Land Records in the Irish Registry of Deeds*, (Corstown, Ireland: Brian Nugent, 2012).

O'Neill, Thomas T., "The Irish Land Question, 1830-1850," *Studies, An Irish Quarterly Review*, vol. 44 (1955), (Dublin: Irish Province of the Society of Jesus), pp. 325-336.

Roulston, William J., *Researching Scots-Irish Ancestors, The Essential Genealogical Guide to Early Modern Ulster, 1600-1800*, 2nd ed. (Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 2018).

Smythe, Hamilton, *The Law of Landlord and Tenant in Ireland* (Dublin: Andrew Milliken, 1842).

Online Resources

Burke's Peerage www.burkespeerage.com

FamilySearch www.familysearch.org

FindMyPast www.findmypast.com

Land Owners in Ireland, 1876, Fáilte Romhat www.failteromhat.com/lo1876.php

National Library of Ireland, Catalogue catalogue.nli.ie/

National Library of Ireland, Sources sources.nli.ie/

NUI Galway www.landedestates.ie/

PRONI – eCatalogue www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/search-ecatalogue

PRONI – Landed Estate Records Guide www.nidirect.gov.uk/publications/family-tree-landed-estate-records